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# BEAT THE DEVIL

ALEXANDER COCKBURN

## Superfiend

It is not surprising that the Qaddafi obsession should have sprouted so luxuriantly in the mulch of President Reagan's imagination. Reagan thinks almost exclusively in terms of myth and symbol and has identified Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi as the latest incarnation of that ancient and familiar stereotype in popular culture, the superfiend. His instinct was sure. Only when we examine the roots of the Qaddafi obsession can we understand why press coverage of the Libyan leader has been so consistently appalling.

The function of the superfiend is to act as receptacle for fantasies of an imperial, military, racist and sexual nature, with the fantasist experiencing no moral qualms about his reveries, reasoning that when it comes to absolute evil, normal standards of evidence and behavior may be cast aside.

This moral self-absolution is nicely represented by the phrase "mad dog," which the President used in his last press conference to describe Qaddafi. Everyone knows what happens to a mad dog. George Will stated the theme back in 1981: "Can the Western world be taken seriously in its rhetoric about terrorism, and indeed in its determination to survive [!], if a mad dog on the streets of the world, such as Gadaffi, is allowed to go on like this?"

Stress on Qaddafi's "madness" has the added function of reminding people about evil. Any devotee of trash culture over the past hundred years knows well that the dividing line between evil and madness is all but invisible, and superfiends are absolutely evil or absolutely mad or absolutely both depending on ethnic origin, religious faith and the exigencies of the plot. Chinese superfiends tended to be horribly rational, as did the Jewish villains in anti-Semitic fiction. Constantine Schuabe, the Jewish superfiend in the British best seller of 1903 *When It Was Dark*, had eyes that were "coldly, terribly aware, with something of the sinister and untroubled regard one sees in a reptile's eyes."

Chinese and Jewish villains were superfiendishly cold. Arab superfiends were, and are, hot, as befits men of fanatic faith, desert origin and uncertain but ardent erotic preference. Back in 1973, Shana Alexander touched on some of those attributes in a column in *Newsweek*: "Kaddafi, son of a barefoot Bedouin, dreamed as a child of overthrowing the evil King and leading his people out of poverty and back to the fierce purity of Islam." The phrase "fierce purity" has the correct ethno-sensual *frisson*, which sends us back to T.E. Lawrence's reflections on Bedouin sexuality in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and to that great best seller of the 1920s *The Sheik*, by E.M. Hull. The theme of *The Sheik* was the subjugation of proud, upper-class, Western Diana Mayo by a fierce son of the desert, himself of impeccable lineage, as memorably established in Diana's tumultuous self-discovery:

Quite suddenly she knew—knew that she loved him, that she had loved him for a long time, even when she thought she

hated him. . . . her heart was given for all time to the fierce desert man who was so different from all other men she had met, a lawless savage who had taken her to satisfy a passing fancy and who had treated her with merciless cruelty. He was a brute, but she loved him, loved him for his very brutality, and superb animal strength. And he was an Arab! A man of different race and color, a native; Aubrey would indiscriminately class him as "a damned nigger." She did not care . . . she was deliriously, insanely happy.

The superfiend has, naturally enough, a superplot. And where Qaddafi is concerned, Western popular culture has not failed its task. In an excellent article titled "Qaddafi, Man and Myth," in *Africa Events* for February, John Haiman and Anna Meigs make some incisive observations. There is, for example, the close identification of Qaddafi the superfiend with the superfiends of James Bond movies and similar stereotypes in the great tradition.

They cite recent comic strips that seem to have been mandatory reading in the National Security Council. In one of them King Cybernoid plots world domination. His plan: kidnap the greatest minds of the free world—the commander of NATO, the chief F.B.I. agent, the United States' top nuclear scientist and Dr. Gustav Nemhauser, "the bacteriologist genius." The kidnappings go well, and it takes all Dr. Solar's ingenuity to rescue the cream of the military-industrial complex and thus save Western civilization. As Haiman and Meigs point out, "The extreme puerility of the pseudo-sci-fi trappings of this tale accords with the equal puerility of its political and social assumptions. Yet, while we dismiss the first as merely silly, we find, surprisingly, that with the second we are on familiar and thus respectable ground." Qaddafi, as in *The Fifth Horseman*, becomes the "nut with the bomb," stand-in for all the nuts in the world who actually have the bomb, sewage tank for fears of nuclear obliteration.

Qaddafi's great contribution to the anatomy of superfiendishness has been his deliberate and indeed joyous acceptance of the role thrust upon him by Western fantasists, right down to a cultivation of sexual ambiguity. Sometimes he gives interviews only to women journalists or makes a pass at Imelda Marcos; at other times he dashes about in campy military attire or unisex caftans. (Imelda Marcos told George Bush about the pass, and Bush urged her to give Director of Central Intelligence William Casey a "debriefing," or blow-by-blow account. Finally, Casey and his men asked her whether she'd gone all the way with the superfiend, at which—according to William Deedes's report in the London *Spectator*—she laughed and said, "What a question to ask a girl.")

Bottom line, in terms of myth and symbol, Qaddafi is a youthful portrait of Reagan, the aging Dorian Gray, embodying in his eccentric person the old actor's own charac-

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